

Dialogue

The newsletter of the Human Resources Division, August 2010



ADA Celebration on Boston Common

Twenty years ago, on July 26, 1990, Members of Congress and the Cabinet along with hundreds of disability advocates, individuals with disabilities, families and friends gathered to watch President George H. W. Bush sign the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, creating what the president that day called, “a splendid scene of hope spread across the south lawn of the White House.” On July 26, 2010, a reminiscent scene unfolded as a large crowd gathered on Boston Common to commemorate, socialize, listen to inspirational speeches, and celebrate. Those gathered also acknowledged additional steps that still need to be taken and rallied together to continue the effort.



It was a clear and sunny, afternoon in Boston for the 20th anniversary celebration of the ADA. Just before noon, around the curve of a hill, a long parade of enthusiastic marchers suddenly appeared, chanting hurrahs for the ADA. On stage, the band

struck up a lively song to welcome them in. People danced as they browsed the booths that lined the walkway. In the grass in front of the stage, a gentleman kicked off his shoes and settled into his seat, smile on his face. Some carried over chairs from the main lawn and congregated in the shade off to the side. People savored this day and this celebration.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was created to give individuals with disabilities fair access to the full fruits of American life, including public services and accommodations, transportation, and employment. In his address to the crowd – brief but animated – Governor Patrick highlighted the ways Massachusetts has been advancing that mission. He spoke of the Commonwealth’s community first housing strategy and the initiative to make Massachusetts a model employer of people with disabilities. He acknowledged, too, that the work is ongoing and urged, “Don’t spend the time worrying over what we haven’t done yet. Spend the time strategizing, figuring out a way to push me and others in the right direction.”

Access to employment has been a significant piece of the ADA since the very beginning, not only for the benefit of people with disabilities but as important for American businesses and economic life as well. “To our friends in the business community,” President Bush said at the birth of the ADA, “you have in your



hands the key to the success of this Act, for you can unlock a splendid resource of untapped human potential that, when freed, will enrich us all.” Boston’s 20th anniversary celebration featured numerous examples of individuals with disabilities whose presence in and contributions to society have indeed been enriching: journalist and author John Hockenberry, young musician Matt Savage, comedian Jonathan Katz, and numerous activists, human service providers and community leaders.

Similarly, several guest speakers, including Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, pointed out that the architectural considerations mandated by the ADA have made public spaces more inviting and accessible to all, not only to individuals with disabilities, and have rightfully become seamlessly blended into the look of cities and towns across the nation.

At the signing ceremony of the ADA, President Bush noted the tremendous efforts of the community that had crafted and supported the legislation. “Your triumph is that your bill will now be law, and that this day belongs to you.” So it did in Boston that afternoon twenty years later.



**The Commonwealth:
Working to be a Model Employer**

The ADA in Massachusetts: Hindsight is 20 (Years)

At the 10-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Myra Berloff, Director of the Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD) remembers, “the big news was that ‘we got a curb cut on this corner.’” There is much more to show for progress at the twenty-year anniversary mark, which the nation celebrated at the end of July 2010.

Massachusetts’ involvement in disability access issues didn’t start with the ADA, which was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990.

The MOD was created in 1981, and the Architectural Access Board has existed since 1967. Even so, it has been a long road, but with a generation’s worth of triumphs along the way. The biggest change has been a shift in attitude. These days, sidewalks are created with curb cuts automatically. Fifteen years ago, MOD fought to get the Royal Plaza Trade Center accessible, which was full of steps and staircases difficult to navigate. Now, no hotel would be built that way. And thanks to an ADA complaint, MOD is winning a battle to get locks removed from wheelchair

lifts, enabling people to operate them independently without needing to find someone with a key.

This attitude shift has also changed the way people think about access to employment for people with disabilities. Massachusetts is actively working to establish itself as a model employer of people with disabilities, and the Executive Branch includes high level management positions to advise on equal opportunity and disability policies and programs. Accommodation requests are more common – and more encouraged – as the understanding grows that people with disabilities have great capacity to benefit their employers and society at large. Far from claiming their work is done, MOD continues to identify new areas where accessibility needs improvement, for example in computer technology. “They couldn’t make laws about something we didn’t know would be a part of our future,” admits Berloff. There is plenty of work to be done, but to see how far things have already changed in the past 20 years is to know there is much more good to come in the next 20.

Are we making progress?

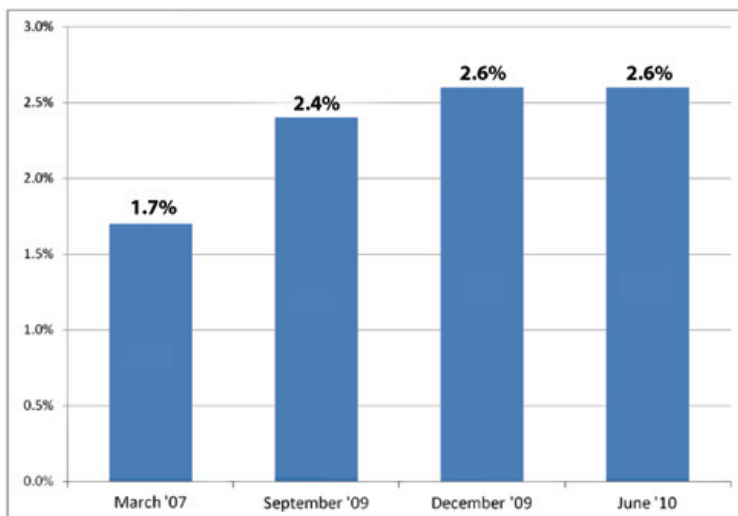
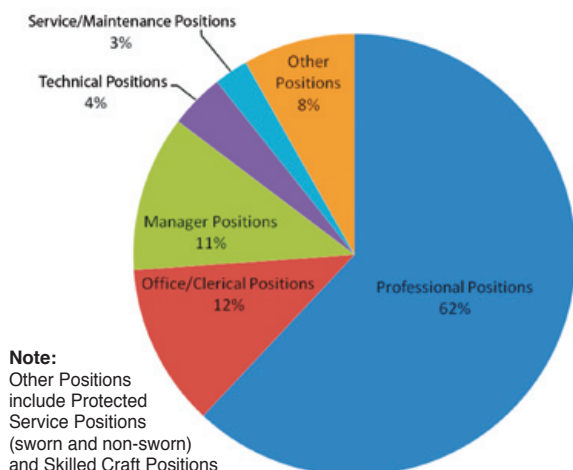


Figure 1. The Percentage of Executive Branch Employees who Self-Identify as Having a Disability from March 2007 to June 2010

Figure 2. The Majority of Executive Branch Employees who have Self-Identified as Having a Disability are in Professional Positions



How can I find my ADA coordinator?

If you need to find the ADA coordinator for your agency, you may access www.mass.gov/mod for a complete list.



The Massachusetts State House is often rhetorically referred to as “the people’s house” by civic leaders and orators with a poetic bent. In his role as the first ADA coordinator for the State House, Carl Richardson makes that sentiment a reality by working for greater public access to the historic building.

Carl came to the State House from the media access group at WGBH three years ago, already familiar with issues of technology related access and accommodations for people with disabilities. The appeal of the State House position, which he found through the recommendation of a One-Stop Career Center, was three-fold. “It was at the State House, so I figured I’d be more visible,” Carl says. That visibility would mean a chance to make an impact on people’s lives. And particularly appealing was the opportunity to make the State House a more inviting, accommodating place for visitors. “I don’t feel like the ADA is an affirmative action thing,” Carl explains. “But I see it as making things equal for everybody,” giving people an equal chance to experience and pursue opportunities of interest to them. Indeed, the compliments the Bureau of State Office Buildings has received regarding the accessibility of the State House have come as much from the general public as from people with disabilities.

Since Carl began his work at the State House, the building has seen many changes of which he is pleased. The process of installing new signage, making directions much more clear and things visibly marked, was completed. New electronic doors have been installed and old, broken ones have been made functional. Public rooms, such as hearing rooms, have been wired for Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART). The Bureau has established a process for requesting interpreters for events. The State House has new lifts so that people with mobility impairments of any stripe can take part in the tours.

Meet one of our ADA Coordinators

Carl Richardson *Bureau of State Office Buildings*

“I think everybody benefits... And I am able to give back through the position I have now.”

The biggest change Carl sees, however, is an attitudinal shift. He is most proud to notice that people with disabilities know they are welcome in the building, to tour, to assemble, to advocate, to mingle seamlessly with all the others who come into the State House for myriad reasons. His work has undoubtedly helped facilitate this. He has conducted ADA trainings for staff, court officers (who manage the flow of people in and around the House and Senate Chambers) and DCR Park Rangers (who help provide security for the building). He is called upon by legislators with questions or concerns. A collaborative effort between the Bureau of State Office Buildings and the Massachusetts Office on Disability produced a “tip-card” for the DCR Park Rangers, who are on the front lines of access to the State House, explaining in simple terms how to interact with people with varying disabilities. Carl smiles to recall a Deaf-Blind Day he helped coordinate in March. Twenty-five deaf-blind individuals spent a day at the State House. They each had their own interpreter, they were greeted at their event by House Speaker Robert DeLeo, they were able to tour the building, and they spent the afternoon meeting with legislators and staff to advocate for those things that were important to them. Until that opportunity, Carl says, many of them “didn’t even know they could come here.”

With the movement toward universal access design and efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive workforce through model employer initiatives, “I think everybody benefits,” says Carl. As someone who lives with Usher Syndrome, which impairs both hearing and eyesight, Carl uses a guide dog and hearing aides, and has seen the richness and fruitfulness that the ADA has allowed in his own life. “I have a guide dog. I’m able to go everywhere and travel safely without assistance from other people. There’s Braille on the elevator so I know what floor I’m getting off at. I use assistive technology. I can go to the movies and have a date with my wife. And I’m able to give back through the position I have now.” And so he does. What goes around comes around, and in making the State House a more welcoming place for all people, from mothers pushing baby strollers to elderly men with faded hearing, Carl is putting to very good use the opportunities that the ADA gave him to make his mark on the world.